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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN, PART 4:
ISLAMISTS AND THE PULL OF EXTREMISM

REF: A. 07 AMMAN 4733

- [¶](#)B. AMMAN 1466
- [¶](#)C. AMMAN 391
- [¶](#)D. 07 AMMAN 4430
- [¶](#)E. AMMAN 1724
- [¶](#)F. AMMAN 1725
- [¶](#)G. AMMAN 1744

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)11. (SBU) Note: This is the fourth cable of a four-part series examining the world of Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps. Part one focused on the different categories of refugees, and the basic structure of the camp system as it exists in Jordan. Part two examined the isolation of the camps - how they are largely cut off from Jordanian society, politics, and economics. Part three looked at the economic situation of the camps and their inhabitants, particularly in light of recent strains on Jordan's economy. Part four examines Islamist politics and extremism in the camps. These cables are the result of focus group meetings with diverse residents of nine camps in Jordan. End Note.

[¶](#)12. (C) Summary: The political and social position of Islamists in Palestinian refugee camps is nuanced and complicated. Despite recent electoral setbacks, Islamists dominate the political life of the camps. The appeal of the Islamists is due in large part to their integration into the social network of the camps rather than the influence of charities run by the Muslim Brotherhood. Even so, economics is a factor that cannot be ignored when assessing the roots of political and social support for Islamist groups. Islamists have also filled a political void in the camps by championing the Palestinian cause. Theories about the decline of political Islam in the camps are ill-founded and little more than wishful thinking, although there are some long-term trends that may allow for a political shift. People in the camps see support for terrorism as a social problem with multiple causes. End Summary.

The IAF's Base

[¶](#)13. (C) Despite recent electoral setbacks and public displays of disunity (Ref A), the Muslim Brotherhood is still the primary political force in the camps. The Brotherhood's political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), is the party that most contacts in the camps look to represent their interests. Note: Not all camp residents can vote. The gradations of Jordanian citizenship are described in Ref B. End Note. Jordanian elites have a series of theories about why this is the case - they assume that residents of the camps support the IAF out of ignorance, lack of other political options, or because they are heavily influenced by power brokers. Yet our contacts in the camps paint a picture that is more nuanced and complex.

[¶](#)14. (C) Ahmad Awad, the UNRWA camp services officer in Baqa'a Camp, maintains that the IAF genuinely represents the

political preferences of camp residents. Discussions with residents of the camps bear this out - they talk freely about the solidarity they feel with the IAF's view of the world, both in their canned diatribes and in franker private conversations. Our contacts particularly stress that Islam is a critical pillar of daily life, not just in the mosque but in the community and in the relationship with the state. It is clear that religion is a core element of their worldview - one that informs their political beliefs just as much as it informs their social lives. Said Ajawi, a resident of Irbid camp, put it simply: "No country, no people, no land...God is all we have left."

¶15. (C) Part of the natural appeal of the IAF in the camps is that some of its main proponents, the imams and clerics, hold positions of social and cultural authority and are considered pillars of the community. "They are in a place of trust," says Abu Ra'ed Darash, a resident of Zarqa camp. "Those who believe in Islam must be good people." Government contacts frequently note that it is hard for them to compete with Islamists who can reach their target audience five times every day. Note: For example, Royal Court Chief Bassem Awadallah recently made such an argument to a visiting delegation, adding that the "mosque was more important than media outlets." End Note. Contacts in the camps essentially confirm this - even though contact with religious authorities is more often than not an interaction that has little to do with politics or economics. Yet for those who are interested in those topics, there is ample opportunity to engage with the Islamist point of view.

An Emotional Bond

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¶16. (C) Equal to, if not more important than, the social position of IAF members is the fact that the party is an integral part of the social and economic network of the camp. "The IAF follows the minute daily details of our society. They know when people get married. They know when people have children. They are involved in all of this. They are experts," Awad notes. Residents of the Jebel Hussein camp talk about Muslim Brotherhood-linked charities helping out with funeral expenses, and creating an "adopt an orphan" program that assists the camp's most vulnerable children to attend school.

¶17. (C) The IAF's use of Muslim Brotherhood-linked charitable organizations is frequently cited in the Jordanian and international media as the hook that is used to create electoral leverage with residents of the camps. In talking to residents of the camps, it is certainly the case that the charities create an emotional bond in addition to any economic one. The camps are tightly knit communities that are largely isolated from the rest of Jordanian society. In this context, person-to-person contact is what drives the social (and therefore political) preferences of people in the camps. "It is important to look at the closeness people feel with the (IAF) candidates," says Suzan Ladhabit of Jebel Hussein camp. On the other side, residents of the camps talk about alienation from the Jordanian government. Awad asserts: "The government is not part of the social network of the camps. They deal with the residents of the camps only through rigid procedures, not on a human level."

Manufacturing Consent

¶18. (C) This is not to say that economic considerations are not part of the equation. Awad says that monetary and other aid funneled through Muslim Brotherhood-oriented charities is more than that given by the so-called "safety net" of UNRWA and the Jordanian government combined. People from the Jebel Hussein camp talk about the restrictive, paperwork-heavy process of obtaining assistance from the Jordanian government

and UNRWA, comparing it unfavorably with the targeted, immediate, and relatively bureaucracy-free assistance they receive from Islamist charities.

¶19. (C) A prime example of the perceived inflexibility of international aid to people in the camps is a rule (recently eliminated by the Jordanian government for its own assistance, but still in place for UNRWA) that families cannot receive economic assistance if even one of their male children is over nineteen years old and not studying, serving in the military, or in jail. It was originally assumed that this "breadwinner" status would allow older children to begin work, thereby sharing the proceeds of their labor with their families and pushing the family towards self-sufficiency. Yet for families with many children, the reaching of that majority age by the eldest son or daughter can have a disastrous impact on family finances. "If a family of seven kids has even one nineteen-year-old, they're sunk," says Salam Hamdan. Contacts indicate that Islamist charities then rush in to fill this gap, propping up families who would otherwise fall through the cracks.

¶10. (C) Residents of the camps realize that there are ideological strings attached to aid flows from Islamist charities. "In principle, humanitarian aid is the goal, but ideology also comes with it," says Afaf Mejdelawi of Zarqa camp. Still, economic desperation leads people in the camps to take whatever they can get, regardless of what is said in their names as a result. "There is simply no other way," says Abu Ra'ed Darash, also from Zarqa camp. In addition, recipients of economic assistance from Islamist charities have little knowledge about where it originates. Since the Muslim Brotherhood's charities receive funding primarily as anonymously donated zakat (alms for the poor which are required of all Muslims), there is rarely a connection between benefactor and recipient. "We don't know exactly where the money (from Islamist charities) comes from," says Ibrahim Natour of Baqa'a camp. "We assume that it comes from outside the camp, since people here are too poor to donate that kind of money."

¶11. (C) Residents of the camps are grateful for any kind of economic assistance, and have a keen sense of what money can be squeezed from what source. While they bash American policy freely and openly, contacts in the camps are always careful to note that America "helps them" economically through its contributions to UNRWA. They are very aware of the health centers and schools that American money constructs, and are not shy about asking for funds for future projects. ("Tell Congress..." is a constant refrain.) Note:

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One resident of Souf camp wondered why American funding flowed indirectly through UNRWA for refugees, but through direct, publicized projects for the remainder of Jordan's population. "UNRWA is no USAID," he complained. End Note.

A Palestinian Champion

¶12. (C) Meetings with any political contact in Jordan, regardless of origin or political persuasion, are likely to descend at some point into a fervent criticism of U.S. policy towards the Palestinians. In meetings with camp residents, however, these speeches are based on personal experience. More often than not, the people of the camps use the hawkish talking points of the IAF when they talk about normalization of relations with Israel, the peace process, and a solution to the conflict. While it is unclear whether the IAF mirrors refugee opinion or vice versa, there is clearly wide support in the camps for what the IAF is saying about the political situation of Palestinians in Jordan and the region.

¶13. (C) Contacts in several different camps realized that the IAF's public support for Hamas was unpopular in Jordanian society as a whole, but claimed that it has cost them little

among the Palestinians in the camps. In a discussion with refugees in Souf camp, it was clear that support for extremists played a role in their political choices - one contact admitted that he considered the suicide bombers who attacked two hotels in Amman in 2005 "martyrs," although he qualified his statement (likely for our benefit) by saying that "there are degrees of martyrdom."

¶14. (C) Oraib Rantawi, a prominent commentator of Palestinian origin, believes that the Jordanian government has essentially ceded the camps to the Islamists, while at the same time denying them sanctuary elsewhere in Jordan. "It's easy to demonstrate for the Palestinian cause in Wahdat camp. But it's impossible to organize such a demonstration in (the East Banker stronghold of) Salt," he says. Rantawi thinks that Islamists have capitalized on this strategy, creating a deep cultural and political division between the camps and the rest of Jordanian society. In the end, Rantawi wonders why "members of the Muslim Brotherhood have the chance to contact every resident of the camps five times every day," yet the government has no operational person-to-person contact that can compete.

¶15. (C) Mohammed Al-Masri, a researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan who frequently conducts focus groups in the camps, believes that as a result of limiting political space for Palestinians, the IAF has become essentially the only option for the people of the camps (Ref C). "The IAF represents Palestinians more than any other organization in Jordan. There are very few Palestinians in parliament. There is no 'Jordanian-Palestinian Friendship Organization' which can advocate for their rights in society. The only organization that is actively pushing the agenda of the Palestinian community is the IAF," Masri asserts.

Support on the Decline?

¶16. (C) The IAF performed poorly across the board in the November 2007 parliamentary elections, but it did especially poorly among its traditional supporters in the camps. Several theories surfaced about why this was the case - a split in the party, the unpopularity of the IAF's pro-Hamas rhetoric, or the decline of Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties throughout the Arab world were all put forth as theories for the IAF's loss (Ref A). Yet our contacts in the camps attribute the IAF's declining support to one factor only - its inability to deliver services.

¶17. (C) Said Ajawi, a resident of Irbid camp, told us that residents of the camps are looking for members of parliament who can deliver essential government services that would otherwise fall through the cracks between UNRWA and the government of Jordan. "People want to elect someone who will be able to do something. The residents of the camps used to see the IAF members as good men who could accomplish something. Yet when they got into parliament, they didn't do anything." Mohammed Akel, a resident of Souf camp, agrees, saying: "Do they represent me? No, they do not. Their economic program has been a disaster."

¶18. (C) It is clear in talking to the people of the camps that while the assistance of Muslim Brotherhood-linked charities is appreciated and needed, it is no substitute for concrete action on the part of the Jordanian government. Abu Ra'ed Darash, a sheikh from Zarqa camp, points out that Islamists have the ability to provide short-term aid to the

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camps, but are essentially unable to deliver long-term support in the form of jobs, training, and infrastructure. "We are looking for government action," he says.

¶19. (C) Contacts in some camps also mentioned that assistance from Muslim Brotherhood-linked charities is

beginning to take on the unseemly qualities that were previously used by Islamists to characterize the Jordanian government - nepotism, inefficiency, and corruption. "It's not an open door," says Afaf Mejdelawi, a resident of Zarqa camp. "They prefer to support their relatives and those who have 'wasta' (connections) within the organization."

Suleyman Abu Takhayneh, a resident of Sukhna camp, asserts: "If they come here, we'll cut off their beards." He claims that the Muslim Brotherhood-linked charities selectively distribute zakat to blood or ideological allies. Note: Just a few minutes later, however, Abu Takhayneh remarked, "whoever gives me more money, I'll vote for him." End Note.

¶20. (C) Regardless of its ability or inability to deliver services, contacts in the camps talk about the IAF as a much needed check on state power. Bajis Hueitah, a community leader in the Baqa'a camp, told us that people voted for IAF member Mohammed Akel "just to vote against the government - they know that he won't do anything." Ibrahim Natour, another Baqa'a resident, insists that people in the camps "don't like decisions to be imposed on them from above" and see the IAF as a grassroots voice that those in the camps can rely upon to reflect their interests.

¶21. (C) Throughout Jordan, our contacts noted a sharp increase in the amount of money spent during the November 2007 parliamentary election cycle (Ref D). The advent of the businessman-turned-politician meant an uptick in the amount of "walking around money" disbursed by candidates of all stripes. Residents of the Souf camp talked about a bidding war of sorts between these candidates and the IAF. Realizing that the IAF candidates were politically vulnerable on the service front, independent candidates (who were largely East Bankers) stepped into the void to assert their ability to deliver where the IAF could not. As a consequence, several residents of Souf camp noted that the IAF candidate won a much closer contest than usual, with the majority of his support coming from outside the camp.

¶22. (C) Despite the decreased numbers of IAF representatives in parliament, it is clear that the IAF still casts a long shadow in the camps, both as a result of its grassroots machine and as a function of its policy preferences. Many in the camps chalk up the popular theories on the IAF's decline as nothing more than wishful thinking. Said Ajawi says that contrary to popular opinion, the IAF is "not as Islamic as most people in the camps would like" and that residents of the camps are "becoming more conservative" over time.

The Roots of Extremism

¶23. (C) There is a clear divide in the minds of camp residents with whom we spoke between support for political Islam and support for terrorism. Discussions with camp residents on the subject often produce vocal condemnation of Islamist terrorists and their actions. Yet the line between support for "legitimate Palestinian resistance" and support for terrorism is less clear cut, especially when talking about the situation in Palestine proper rather than in Jordan. Regardless of the ideology behind it, contacts in the camps realize that some of their friends and neighbors are among the "misguided". When asked about what the community is doing about extremists in their midst, the people in the camps that we talked to were divided.

¶24. (C) The relatively closed social network of the camps can help to stigmatize extremism among friends and relatives, but residents of the camps are careful to point out that self-policing only goes so far. Ibrahim Natour, a resident of Baqa'a camp, acknowledges that while there are distinct advantages of the "tight relations" between members of the camp community, that community is often remiss in bringing those tilting towards extremism back into the fold. He believes that fear of retribution is behind the lack of self-policing within the camps - people know who the extremists are, but the extremists are part of the same social networks and are likely to know their accusers as well.

¶25. (C) Camp residents are cognizant of the internal factors that allow extremists to find sanctuary in their communities, but also realize that the problem is far bigger than that. Lack of employment opportunity and social despair are frequently cited as reasons that extremism persists in the camps, but the analysis sometimes goes beyond these factors. Contacts in the Jebel Hussein camp drew a direct connection

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between extremism and the "brain drain" from the camps. Salam Hamdan talks about the proliferation of geographically single mothers in the camps. These women have husbands that work in the gulf or elsewhere, and rely on remittances to feed themselves and their children. Yet in the absence of a strong (and present) father figure, Hamdan argues that many of the youth in the camps are easily led astray by the prospect of belonging to a social network. Note: Even those remittances may not be enough. A 2006 study of UNRWA's special hardship program showed that of the families who receive extra financial assistance, forty-five percent had a female as their effective head of household - four times more than the refugee population as a whole. Eighty-four percent of special hardship cases were dependent primarily on remittance income. End Note.

Comment

¶26. (C) Diverting support away from political Islam in the camps will not be easy. It will require a concentrated effort that deals with the economic, political, and social problems in the camps while creating a workable compromise between liberal ideals and a conservative, religious ideology. Yet perhaps most importantly, it will take a Jordanian government that can connect to the people of the camps on an emotional level. Since the 1971 expulsion of Fatah from Jordan, successive, resource-strapped governments have left the provision of services to UNRWA, while the GID was used to stifle any threatening revival of Palestinian political parties. That left the field fertile and open to exploitation by the Jordanian Muslim Brothers. With issues of identity still dividing Jordan, the fate of the refugees still subject to Israeli-Palestinian negotiation, and a strapped budget, the Jordanian government is unlikely to be motivated to take on controversy by better meeting the needs of its refugee population. In the context of a two-state resolution, however, Jordan will have to face squarely the question of the identity and loyalty of Palestinians who will remain in Jordan, and the obligations of the state toward them. International support and assistance will be essential for Jordan to face successfully what Adnan Abu Odeh called "the moment of truth." Meanwhile, many of the refugees will remain on the margins, drifting further into despair, and possibly seeking more radical solutions.

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